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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: IFTAAR DINNER BUILDS RAPPORT WITH
KAZAKH-LANGUAGE AND MUSLIM COMMUNITY LEADERS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 14, the Ambassador hosted an Iftaar dinner for more than 20 prominent Muslim community members, including the Deputy Chairman of the Kazakhstani Muslims' Spiritual Board Muhammad Alsabekov, many Kazakh-language journalists, and university students. Participants thanked the Ambassador for arranging such a culturally-appropriate opportunity to convey President Obama's Ramadan message and hold a fruitful conversation. The participants -- leaders of Kazakhstan's Muslim community who predominantly speak Kazakh -- urged Post to engage more with the Kazakh-language community. END SUMMARY.

ENTHUSIASTIC, APPRECIATIVE PARTICIPANTS

¶3. (SBU) During an Iftaar dinner the Ambassador hosted in Almaty on September 14, more than 20 leaders of the Muslim community and Kazakh-language journalists engaged in a lively discussion about bilateral relations and domestic events. The Deputy Chairman of the Kazakhstani Muslims' Spiritual Board Muhammad Alsabekov -- serene, soft-spoken, and understated except for his gold-embroidered navy-blue velvet traditional robe -- told the Ambassador that the Grand Mufti would have attended, but was currently hospitalized because of serious complications from diabetes. For his formal remarks, the Ambassador read an abridged version of President Obama's Ramadan message. Participants applauded more than politely and took home copies of Post's Russian translation.

¶4. (SBU) The following day, journalists from "Alash Ainasy" newspaper and the "Assyk Arna" Islamic television station thanked Post, saying, "We are very thankful for yesterday's after-fast evening meal. Those people who give such a meal to people who are fasting shall be rewarded with God's goodness. May Allah be rejoiced seeing your respect to Islam!" A scholar with a doctorate in philosophy who works as a senior manager for Price Waterhouse Coopers also wrote to PolOff expressing appreciation for "the opportunity to chat with the Ambassador and hear his answers to my questions."

A NEW PERSPECTIVE FROM THE KAZAKH-LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

¶5. (SBU) Participants pointed out that Kazakh-language media view

international political incidents, especially the Russo-Georgian conflict of August 2008, very differently than Kazakhstani Russian press. According to one of the Ambassador's interlocutors, the Kazakh-language press immediately criticized Russia's actions during the August 2008 conflict and "100 percent supported Georgia." They criticized the Russian-language media for largely supporting Russia.

One professor told the Ambassador that the Kazakh-language intellectual community is significantly more pro-American than the Russian-language community. They encouraged Post to expand outreach to Kazakh-language media and NGOs, rather than focus on larger and more entrenched Russian-language entities. Everyone spoke Russian, but one of the most respected young people at PolOff's table was a man who had won a national Kazakh-language contest. The group agreed that Kazakh usage is -- and should be -- increasing, telling PolOff, "Next time you come back, let's speak only in Kazakh." (COMMENT: Being able to hold a basic conversation in Kazakh helped PolOff establish a rapport. END COMMENT.)

ISLAM ON THE RISE AGAIN

16. (SBU) According to students from Al-Farabi National University, "religion is a growing force in Kazakhstan." They noted Kazakhstan's July 1-2 Congress of Leaders of World Religions demonstrated Kazakhstan's values of religious diversity and tolerance. (NOTE: Kazakhstani officials announced their country will make promoting inter-religious tolerance a key tenet of Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE Chairmanship. END NOTE.) Iftaar participants at PolOff's table, mostly young people in their 20s and 30s, unanimously agreed that the number of followers of Islam in Kazakhstan is growing rapidly. One journalist told PolOff he just founded a new religious television station broadcasting in the Almaty area. PolOff's interlocutors highlighted the importance of

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charity in Islam, and its positive effects on society. "Unfortunately, our charity organizations, even Islamic ones, are not well-developed yet," Kuanyshbekova said. "We could learn a lot about this from U.S. organizations, which are well-known for their activities." One of the most talkative interlocutors, "Alash Ainas" newspaper correspondent Anar Kuanyshbekova, said the post-Soviet rebirth of Islam is a positive force, causing a sharp drop in alcohol abuse -- and associated problems.

CAN YOU WEAR HEADSCARVES IN U.S. SCHOOLS?

17. (SBU) PolOff's interlocutors, none of whom had travelled to the United States, expressed sincere interest in learning more about U.S. Islamic communities. Kuanyshbekova asked if U.S. schools permitted women to wear headscarves, and said her cousin, a Kazakhstani teacher, had been told she could not wear hers at school. PolOff asked the young journalists to comment on a conversation PolOff overheard between three young women on an Almaty bus near the Grand Mosque, comparing attitudes towards religion, specifically wearing headscarves, in France and Kazakhstan. (NOTE: According to PolOff's personal observation, wearing the hijab in Kazakhstan is increasing, although less than 10 percent of the female population wear headscarves, even during Ramadan. PolOff observed two young women enter a restaurant to break their Ramadan fast wearing headscarves, pray before eating, and then tuck their headscarves into their purses. Fewer women wear headscarves in Astana than Almaty. END NOTE.) Iftaar attendees echoed Kazakhstan's prevailing sentiment of tolerance, and said women should be free to wear headscarves, if they choose.

THEY'RE NOT READING WHAT WE'RE READING

18. (SBU) None of PolOff's interlocutors spoke English well, or had read President Obama's Cairo speech. Only one person at PolOff's table, a young man also fluent in Arabic, said he watched a few televised portions. The young man said he "had a positive impression of the United States," due to a friend's experience. His friend wanted to visit a mosque in the United States, but got lost. Since he looks Central Asian, he was initially afraid to ask the police for directions, because he thought they would think he was a terrorist. The young man recounted that when he did finally ask a police officer, he politely replied and personally helped him find

the mosque!

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Post held several well-attended events focused on the President's Cairo speech. The warm reception the participants gave the Ambassador suggests that we might have opportunities to build bridges with Kazakhstan's growing population of observant, Kazakh-speaking Muslims. The majority of the news here originates from Russia. But, as we have urged before, providing Post with more funding to translate documents and distribute them, including increasing our Kazakh-language translation capacity, is critical to break down communication barriers. END COMMENT.

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